



Pick Your Path to Health

Grieving is Healthy When You Lose a Loved One

When a loved one dies, no two people grieve in exactly the same way.

As an African American woman, you are often seen as the strong one in the family, the one who is there for everyone else, the survivor. You cope with daily life without much emotional or financial support.

Being there for others is noble and may help you along the grieving path, but be careful! Women who are the source of care for their family may postpone their grieving and forget to think about themselves.

And thinking about your needs when a loved one dies is a must to stay healthy.

How We Grieve

Counselors who have studied this process have identified five stages or phases that we experience while coming to terms with a loss:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

These are not steps that must be climbed in succession but are like waves that "roar in and out," notes Carleen Brice, author of *Lead Me Home: An African American's Guide Through the Grief Journey*. Over time, these feelings will give way to acceptance for most people-but a few get stuck at one stage or another. Being stuck isn't healthy because it doesn't allow you to pass through the phases to acceptance and healing. Instead, you remain in denial and feel depressed or angry. Here are a few warning signs to help you know when you are stuck. You may:

- Try and block grief with alcohol, drugs, or other risk-taking behaviors; or
- Keep busy to the point of exhaustion to avoid thinking about and feeling your loss; or
- Avoid your emotions and act resentful of those who try to help; or

- Remain depressed after several months and are unable to function in everyday life.

When the emotions get stuck, they block the healing process-and when there is another loss, they often reappear. One counseling center advises its clients, "Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain; neither leads to healing."

An African American Perspective

For African Americans, the grief process is often complicated and magnified by other factors. According to Karla Holloway, dean of the humanities and social sciences at Duke University, death and dying for African Americans has "all too often been marked by inadequate health care and violence-shaping a very different perspective about suffering and mourning."

For example, mourners may be frustrated that African American women are more likely to die from certain cancers than other women or that their rates of chronic diseases are higher. There may also be a sense of loss and despair at the number of young African American males who suffer drug and violence-related deaths-not only affecting their families and friends but entire generations.

Allowing Yourself To Grieve

Whether your loss is painful, complex, and disorienting or a simple mixture of regret and relief will depend on your relationship with the person who has left or died, the way they died, and your culture and beliefs.

Feeling sad, angry, crazy, guilty, and preoccupied is normal. The best thing you can do is to allow yourself to feel all the emotions and go through the stages-with help if necessary-to reach acceptance. Be compassionate with yourself and accept support from family, friends, the clergy, or some other spiritual advisor. If additional help is needed, consider talking to a social worker or mental health specialist or join a support group.

Loss can also affect you physically-it's not unusual for someone who is grieving to have shortness of breath, heart palpitations, upset stomach, and sleep irregularities. Sometimes it may be difficult to see that the physical pain is tied to the emotional, but they often go hand in hand. Grief is the mind and body's way of accepting loss, so take good care of

yourself. Eat well-balanced meals. Get plenty of rest, and be patient. Some days will be better than others.

Will I Ever Get Over This?

"Although you won't forget about your loss, and you won't 'get over it,' you will get through it," writes Brice in *Lead Me Home: An African American's Guide Through the Grief Journey*. It takes time to heal. Allow yourself to grieve in your own unique way.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.